

WHAT ARE DISTRICTS' WRITTEN POLICIES REGARDING STUDENT SUBSTANCE-RELATED INCIDENTS?

This brief describes key features of the high school alcohol and drug policies in the 100 largest school districts in the United States. The written policies of at least 80% of these districts include parent conferences, referral to law enforcement, principal-determined suspensions, or referral for expulsion hearings (or some combination of these) as a consequence for students caught possessing, using, selling, or distributing alcohol or other drugs. Policy documents also indicate that districts may refer students to counseling, classes, and community services to help students with substance use issues.

Recent events have increased interest in district policies relating to substance use and whether they best serve the needs of their communities and students. News stories and research reviews have highlighted the potential negative academic and emotional consequences of long suspensions from school or transfers to new schools resulting from “zero tolerance” rules ushered in over the last decade for students found to be in possession of, under the influence of, or distributing alcohol or drugs.¹ While the effectiveness of the policies has not been rigorously studied, in 2004 70 percent of teachers and nearly the same proportion of parents supported zero tolerance as a way to communicate to students the consequences of serious misbehavior.² To better understand the nature of substance-related discipline rules and guidelines that may be in use around the country, the Institute of Education Sciences (IES) commissioned a study to examine the features of the written substance-related policies for the 100 largest school districts. The study was conducted by RMC Research Corporation.

Data and Methods

Using information from the IES’ National Center for Education Statistics’ 2007 Common Core of Data, the study team identified the 100 school districts in the United States with the largest number of students enrolled.³ Between January and March 2011, the team visited each district’s web site and searched for documents containing information on the district’s alcohol and drug policies. Each of the 100 districts had a relevant policy document on its website; 81 districts had policy documents with dates pertaining to the 2010–2011 school year, while policy documents for the remaining 19 districts had no specified date or an earlier date.

The study team developed codebooks to guide systematic coding of district documents and to construct indicators of the districts’ policy responses to student possession, use, sale and/or distribution of alcohol or other drugs.⁴ The features and definitions used for the codebooks were based partly on a review of the literature, for example, using some of the categories employed by Evans-Whipp et al. (2004)⁵ in their review of research on school drug policies. An appendix to this brief contains the codebooks used to code the policy documents for the 100 districts.⁶

Key Findings

This brief provides a snapshot of what district policy documents say about responses to student substance-related incidents. Exhibits 1–4 indicate that there is variation among districts in their documented responses to such incidents, and that the responses may differ depending on whether the infraction involves possession or use versus sale or distribution. Highlights of the findings include:

- A large majority of districts indicate that students may or will be reported to law enforcement for incidents involving the possession or use (86% of districts) or sale or distribution (87% of districts) of alcohol or drugs (Exhibit 1).
- Other commonly reported responses include principal suspensions (98% of districts indicate that students may or will be subject to a principal-determined suspension for possession or use; 84% of districts indicate that students may or will be subject to a principal-determined suspension for sale or distribution), recommendation for an expulsion hearing (90% for possession or use; 94% for sale or distribution), placement in an alternative schooling program (80% for possession or use; 71% for sale or distribution), and parent conference or notification (85% for possession or use; 82% for sale or distribution) (Exhibit 1).
- Nearly one-third of districts (30%) indicate graduated sanctions for repeat offenses (Exhibit 2). For example, 15% of districts (percentage not cited in exhibit) explicitly allow principals to increase the duration of a suspension for possession or use if it is the student's second offense.
- Most district policy documents (93%) treat alcohol offenses the same as other drug offenses; the policies of the remaining districts include less severe sanctions (e.g., referral for expulsion is not mandatory for alcohol offenses but is for drug offenses) (Exhibit 2).
- Some districts explicitly allow for situational factors to be considered in determining responses to substance-related incidences (Exhibit 3). In 43% of districts, the student's prior disciplinary record may be taken into account; in 38% of districts, the student's age or grade; and, in 38% of districts, the seriousness of the offense.
- Districts infrequently have written policies on conditions related to eliminating or shortening suspensions or on conditions required before a student can return to school (Exhibit 4).

Exhibit 1
Percentage of 100 Largest Districts with Policy Documents that Indicate Particular Responses to Substance-Related Incidents

Response	Possession or Use Offense	Sale or Distribution Offense
1. Individual or group counseling at school (not specifically substance use counseling)	48	44
2. Peer mediation	12	10
3. Mentoring program	8	8
4. Behavior contract	38	29
5. Behavioral progress reports	19	12
6. Community or school service	31	25
7. Referral to community organization or agency	23	22
8. Referral to substance abuse counseling, intervention, or treatment program	55	44
9. Provide information regarding alcohol or drug counseling, treatment, and rehabilitation programs	11	9
10. Obtain written assessment for potential dependence	15	11
11. Parent conference or notification	85	82
12. In-school discipline (e.g., detention, in-school suspension, exclusion from extracurricular activities, exclusion from communal lunch)	71	59
13. Principal-determined suspension	98	84
14. Superintendent-determined suspension ^a	24	20
15. Recommend for expulsion hearing ^b	90	94
16. Report to law enforcement	86	87
17. Placement in alternative school or program	80	71

Source: RMC coding of district policy documents (see Exhibit A.2 in the Technical Appendix).

Table reads: In 48% of districts, individual or group counseling is indicated as an optional or mandatory response to instances in which a student is in violation of, or suspected to be in violation of, the district's policy regarding the possession or use of drugs or alcohol. Not all of the responses listed may actually apply to drug and alcohol offenses explicitly; some district policy documents list responses for categories of offenses which include, but are not limited to, drugs and alcohol.

^aIn some districts, the principal or other building administrator had the authority to suspend a student for a limited number of days. For more serious or repeat offenses, only the superintendent or their designee could assign a longer period of suspension.

^bA student may or may not be expelled from school as a result of the hearing.

4 WHAT ARE DISTRICTS' WRITTEN POLICIES REGARDING STUDENT SUBSTANCE-RELATED INCIDENTS?

Exhibit 2
Percentage of 100 Largest Districts with Substance-Related Policy Documents That Include Specific Features

Feature	Percentage of Districts
1. Consequences for drug paraphernalia:	
a. Same as consequences for drugs	58
b. Less severe than consequences for drugs	29
c. Unclear consequences	13
2. Consequences for over the counter (OTC) drugs:	
a. Same as consequences for other drugs	25
b. Less severe than consequences for other drugs	28
c. Unclear consequences	39
d. Includes rules for dispensing only	7
3. Consequences for drugs prescribed for student:	
a. Same as consequences for other drugs	17
b. Less severe than consequences for other drugs	12
c. Unclear consequences	48
d. Includes rules for dispensing only	23
4. Consequences for prescription drugs <i>not</i> prescribed for student:	
a. Same as consequences for other drugs	47
b. Less severe than consequences for drugs	11
c. Unclear consequences	42
5. Consequences for alcohol:	
a. Same as consequences for other drugs	93
b. Less severe than consequences for other drugs	7
6. Consequences for drug and alcohol look-alikes:	
a. Same as consequences for alcohol and drugs	59
b. Less severe than consequences for alcohol and drugs	18
c. Unclear consequences	23
7. Policy includes graduated sanctions for repeat offenses	30
8. Prevention education described in policy	26
9. School-based interventions or remediation described in policy	44
10. Parents sign form indicating receipt of policy document	50

Source: RMC coding of district policy documents (see Exhibit A.3 in the Technical Appendix). Table reads: In the written policies of 58% of the districts the consequences for possession or distribution of drug paraphernalia were the same as the consequences for possession or distribution of drugs.

Exhibit 3**Percentage of 100 Largest Districts with Policy Documents that Indicate that Specific Factors May Be Considered in Determining Responses to Substance-Related Incidents**

Factor	Percentage of Districts
1. Student age or grade	38
2. Student maturity or ability	8
3. Student health	3
4. Student academic placement	6
5. Student attitude	21
6. Student intent	21
7. Previous disciplinary record or prior conduct	43
8. Probability of recurrence	3
9. Time since last incident	4
10. Circumstances of the incident	6
11. Strength of evidence	1
12. Effect of misconduct on school environment or others	22
13. Seriousness of offense	38
14. Student's disability, IEP, or 504 accommodation plan	29
15. Gang relationship	4
16. State law requirements for disciplinary consequences	11
17. Consideration of each violation case by case	11
18. Willingness to enroll in Student Assistance Program	15
19. Willingness to make restitution	4
20. Level of parent cooperation	4
21. Discipline imposed on others in similar circumstances	2

Source: RMC coding of district policy documents (see Exhibit A.4 in the Technical Appendix).

Table reads: Written policies for 38% of the districts listed student age or grade as a factor that may be considered in determining a substance-related incident response.

6 WHAT ARE DISTRICTS' WRITTEN POLICIES REGARDING STUDENT SUBSTANCE-RELATED INCIDENTS?

Exhibit 4
**Percentage of 100 Largest Districts with Substance-Related Policies that Include
Specific Conditions Related to Suspensions or Expulsions**

Condition	Possession or Use Offense	Sale or Distribution Offense
1. Submit to drug testing to:		
a. Eliminate suspension or expulsion	1	0
b. Shorten suspension or expulsion	1	0
c. Required for return to school	2	1
2. Obtain written assessment for alcohol or drug dependence to:		
a. Eliminate suspension or expulsion	1	0
b. Shorten suspension or expulsion	3	2
c. Required for return to school	7	9
3. Complete alcohol or drug education class to:		
a. Eliminate suspension or expulsion	1	1
b. Shorten suspension or expulsion	6	3
c. Required for return to school	4	3
4. Complete authorized counseling program to:		
a. Eliminate suspension or expulsion	2	1
b. Shorten suspension or expulsion	9	3
c. Required for return to school	6	6
5. Complete approved drug or alcohol rehabilitation program to:		
a. Eliminate suspension or expulsion	5	5
b. Shorten suspension or expulsion	6	6
c. Required for return to school	9	8
6. Participate in alternative education program during suspension or expulsion period to:		
a. Eliminate suspension or expulsion	2	2
b. Shorten suspension or expulsion	3	0
c. Required for return to school	7	9
7. Adhere to behavior contract to:		
a. Eliminate suspension or expulsion	1	0
b. Shorten suspension or expulsion	4	2
c. Required for return to school	5	4

Exhibit continues

Exhibit 4 (continued)

Condition	Possession or Use Offense	Sale or Distribution Offense
8. Participate in suspension or expulsion abeyance program to:		
a. Eliminate suspension or expulsion	5	3
b. Shorten suspension or expulsion	13	4
c. Required for return to school	4	4

Source: RMC coding of district policy documents (see Exhibit A.5 in the Technical Appendix).

Table reads: In 1% of the districts, students may eliminate a suspension or expulsion for possession or use of substances by submitting to drug testing.

This brief was prepared and based on analysis for IES by Bonnie Faddis and Chandra Lewis of RMC Research Corporation under contract number ED-04-CO-0041/0006, Project Officer, Melanie Ali.

Endnotes

¹See, for example, [Washington Post article](#); [The Herald Bulletin article](#); Skiba, R. J. (2000). Zero tolerance, zero evidence: an analysis of school disciplinary practice. Policy Research Report #SRS2. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University, Indiana Education Policy Center. Retrieved November 22, 2011, from <http://www.indiana.edu/~safeschl/ztze.pdf>; American Psychological Association. (2008). Are Zero Tolerance Policies Effective in Schools? An Evidentiary Review and Recommendations. *American Psychologist*, Vol. 63 (9) 852-862.

²Public Agenda (2004). Teaching interrupted: Do discipline policies in today's schools foster the common good? Retrieved December 9, 2011 from http://www.publicagenda.org/files/pdf/teaching_interrupted.pdf.

³Retrieved September 29, 2010 from nces.ed.gov/pubs2010/100largest0809/tables/table_d02.asp.

⁴Policies explicitly tied to tobacco products were excluded from review.

⁵Evans-Whipp, T., Beyers, J., Lloyd, S., LaFazia, A., Toumbourou, J., Arthus, M., & Catalano, R. (2004). A review of school drug policies and their impact on youth substance use. *Health Promotion International*, 19(2), 227-234.

⁶The appendix can be found at <http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/pubs/20104025/index.asp>.